

Gender and Genre in Athletic Epigrams: The Case of Kyniska (CEG 820)

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Presented at the *Atlantic Classical Association* Annual General Meeting: October, 2011

Forthcoming presentation at *Feminism and Classics VI*, Brock University: May, 2012

Fig. 1: Spartan statuette of female runner, ca. 560 B.C.



Σπάρτας μὲν βασιλῆες ἐμοὶ πατέρες καὶ ἀδελφοί,
ἄρμα(τ)ι δ' ὠκυπόδων ἵππων νικῶσα Κυνίσκα
εἰκόνα τάνδ' ἔστασ(ε), μόναν δ' ἐμέ φαμι γυναικῶν
Ἑλλάδος ἐκ πάσας τόνδε λαβεῖν στέφανον.

Kings of Sparta were my fathers and brothers,
and, winning with a chariot of swift-footed horses,
Kyniska set up this statue; and I declare that
I alone of women from all of Greece seized this crown.



Fig. 2: Syracusan tetradrachma, ca. 410 B.C.

The 396 B.C. Olympic chariot victory of the Spartan princess Kyniska, as well as the victory monument with epigram which she erected (CEG 820, above), offer a provocative challenge to the inherent masculinity of Greek athletic poetry. In light of Joseph Day's argument (2010) that athletic epigram (an inscribed poem on a monument dedicated after an athletic victory) and epinician (an orally-performed song in honour of athletic victory) both originate from a common source, the *aggelia* or herald's proclamation, along with the fact that the Olympic Games were generally restricted to males, the generic embryo of athletic poetry must be understood as gendered. In fact, I interpret the nucleus of such poetry (the *aggelia*), both oral and inscribed, as a continuum of masculine entities nested within one another: the victorious male, his father, and the patriarchal political entity of the *polis* ("city-state"). While Xenophon's telling of Kyniska's story frames the victory as the rhetorical game of her brother the Spartan King Agesilaus ("to show by her victory that a [victorious] horse is proof of wealth not manly character": Xen. Ag. 9.6; cf. Kyle, 2003), the erection of an inscribed victory memorial indicates that to Kyniska, just as to male Olympic athletes, victory in the chariot race was cause for great celebration and memorialization for posterity. I argue that Kyniska's victory inscription and her use of the epigrammatic genre must be analyzed as an intrusion into a masculine poetic domain. By analyzing Kyniska as a figure who simultaneously crosses generic *and* gendered thresholds, I reveal how her epigram implicitly subverts both the ritual basis of dedicatory poetry and its inherently masculinist rhetoric.

Research supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship. Thanks also to the School of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies and the Department of Classical Studies.

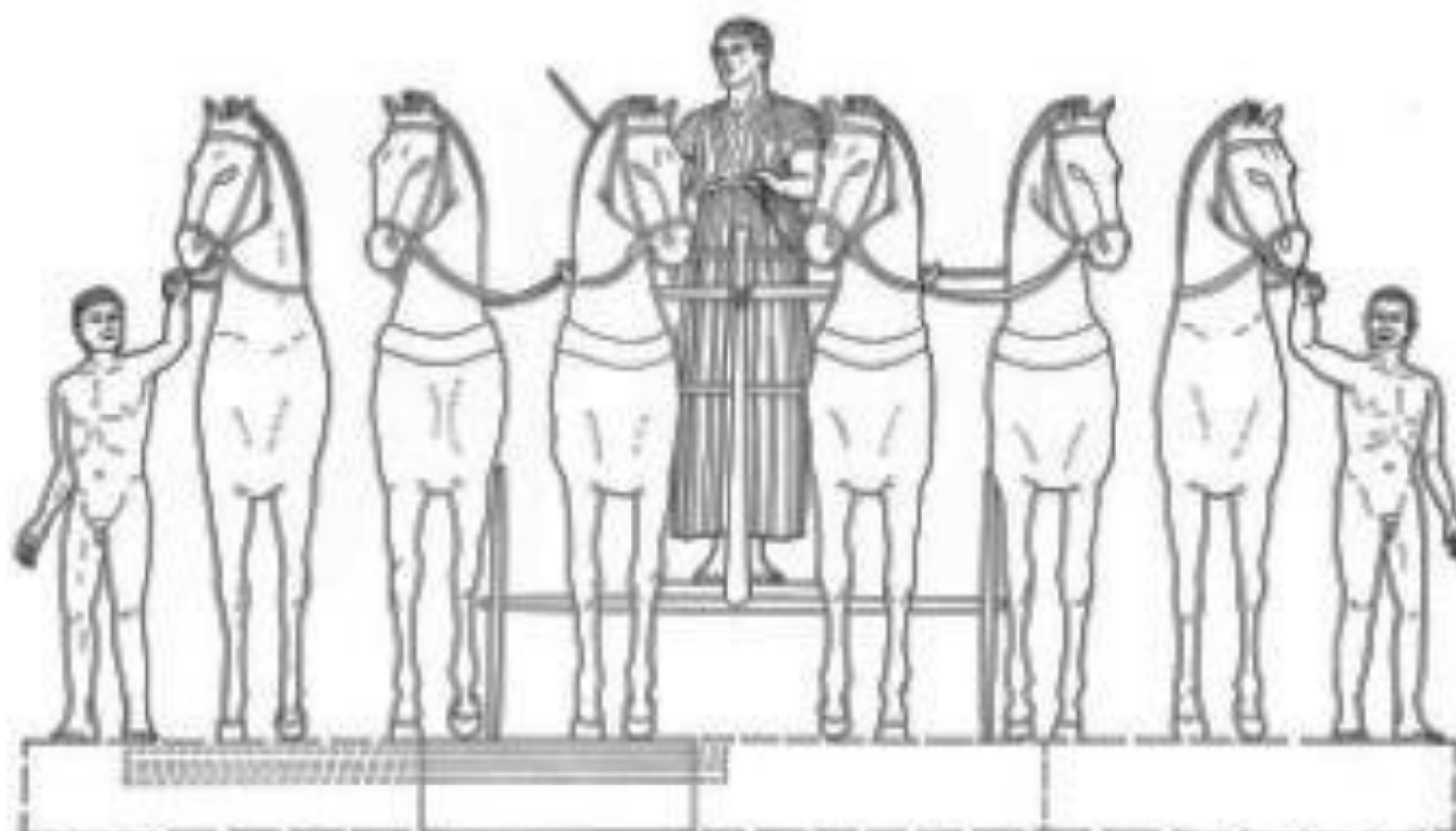


Fig.3: Reconstruction of Delphic Charioteer Victory Monument, Delphi, ca. 474 B.C.

Select Bibliography: Day, J. 2010. *Archaic Greek Epigram and Dedication*. Cambridge; Kurke, L. 1991. *The Traffic in Praise*. Ithaca; Kyle, D. 2003. "The only woman in all Greece." *Journal of Sport History* 30: 183-204; Scanlon, T. 2002. *Eros in Greek Athletics*. Oxford; Stehle, E. 1997. *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece*. Princeton; Young, D.C. 1996. "First with the most: Greek athletic records and specialization." *Nikephoros* 9: 175-197.